

# Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology

---

Volume 21 | Issue 1

Article 3

---

4-28-2013

## Mass Graves and the Politics of Reconciliation: Construction of Memorial Sites after the Srebrenica Massacre

Diana B. Kontsevaia

McGill University, [diana.kontsevaia@mail.mcgill.ca](mailto:diana.kontsevaia@mail.mcgill.ca)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem>



Part of the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kontsevaia, Diana B. (2013) "Mass Graves and the Politics of Reconciliation: Construction of Memorial Sites after the Srebrenica Massacre," *Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology*: Vol. 21: Iss. 1, Article 3.  
Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol21/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact [kmarshal@uwo.ca](mailto:kmarshal@uwo.ca).

---

# Mass Graves and the Politics of Reconciliation: Construction of Memorial Sites after the Srebrenica Massacre

## **Abstract**

Burial is an integral part of reconciling with death. In this way, mortuary practices are made for the living; and the manner of death and burials continue to affect the politics of the living. Especially after collective traumatic events such as the Srebrenica massacre, reburials become central to the reconciliation process of the surviving communities. The process of reburial, however, also facilitates the claims that a particular territory is part of a specific, ethnic 'homeland'. As reburials aim to forget the atrocities, they also commemorate them. Although reburial is one of the few ways of moving on after the death of a loved one, it simultaneously claims territory for the communities whose dead are buried there, potentially reigniting tensions in the future. Reburial allows communal reconciliation, but only for the community of the victims. For the community of the perpetrators, such a reburial only serves as a humiliation and inhibits harmony. Attempting to reconcile post-conflict multi-ethnic communities is thus impossible without understanding the profound effects that the community of the dead continues to play in the lives of the living.

## **Keywords**

mass graves, reconciliation, Srebrenica massacre, Bosnian war, genocide, International Courts

## **Creative Commons License**



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/).

## **Mass Graves and the Politics of Reconciliation: Construction of Memorial Sites after the Srebrenica Massacre**

**Diana B. Kontsevaia**

### *Introduction*

Mass murder and ethnic cleansing are rare and deeply disturbing phenomena. Communities do not deal with mass death by following normal mortuary rituals. Unexposed mass graves serve as constant reminders of the violence imposed on a community, as seen across the world from the Bosnian War (Pollack 2003b) to Argentina's Dirty Wars (Robben 2005). On the communal level, these instances of violence are often dealt with by reburying the victims to facilitate collective forgetting and reconciliation. Reburial of the violently deceased is crucial to reconciliation, especially after collective traumatic events (Pollack 2003a). The process of reburial simultaneously allows collective memory to take on ethnic and political overtones as mass grave excavations, reburials, and memorial building take on political and symbolic meaning. The claim that a particular territory is part of a specific ethnic 'homeland' is legitimized by the ancestors that are buried there. As a result, there is an inherent paradox in reburial. Reburial attempts to forget the atrocities and help communities move on, while commemorating the violence committed. Reburial promises to be a step towards communal healing, but it simultaneously claims territory for the ethnic communities whose dead are buried there, potentially reigniting tensions in the future. This is the case in the former Yugoslav Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, specifically in the

aftermath of the Srebrenica massacre. After almost twenty years of local and international reconciliation attempts, tension still exists between communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Pollack 2003b). The consequences of mass grave excavations and reburials in this region make the current reconciliation practices ineffective, as the mass graves, bodies of the deceased, and the memorials that arise around them constantly remind communities of the ethnic violence committed and inhibit the survivors and the local and international communities to build long-term inter-ethnic peace.

Long-term peace is also unattainable because the reconciliation process has become too fragmented and individualized. This is partially why the tension between Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Muslims still exists after the Srebrenica massacre, despite reconciliation attempts (Pollack 2003b). Each set of actors involved in the process, such as the families of the deceased, the perpetrators, and the members of the International community, have thus far been able to pursue their own goals and as a result produce different collective narratives. The victims' families claim a right to bury their dead, consequently creating memorials of past violence. These memorials, however, often create tension with the perpetrators of those crimes. The perpetrators, mostly soldiers who fought in the war, see the memorials as one sided and unjustified since the crimes are often conceived of as having been committed for defensive reasons (Basic 2007). The international judicial processes further complicate the issue. International authorities often attempt to reconcile ethnic groups by aiding the reburial process and prosecute the generals and nationalist leaders as war

criminals. In identifying the bodies of the individuals in the mass graves and individual perpetrators of the war crimes, the International courts concentrate on the individuals and intimately remind the victims of the ethnic violence that consumed the area. Instead of looking for a collective solution, the International courts take an individual approach to a collective problem. Moreover, the length of the proceedings also plays a part in the maintenance of tensions. New investigations are constantly revealing new, painful information making it harder for the ethnically torn communities to forget and start living together again in peace.

Using the Srebrenica massacre in July 1995 as a case study, this paper will demonstrate the role that mass graves and reburial play in the reconciliation politics of the living. This massacre illustrates how reburials aid the families of the dead to move on, but also how construction of memorials exacerbates ethnic tensions. This paper is presented in three parts. First, a brief background on the Srebrenica massacre is provided. Then, I consider the role of the dead in the politics of the living by examining the construction of collective memory, symbolic forgetting, and the creation of justice between communities. Finally, the problems with the current reconciliation process after the Srebrenica massacre is examined. Currently, the exhumation of the mass graves and identification of the dead and the perpetrators, while providing 'closure' for the victims, also presents challenges to the establishment of long-term peace among the ethnically divided communities. The reburials and creation of memorials from these reburials legitimize physical and symbolic claims

on the territory, which translates into further ethnic and political tension. Constructing a collective, inter-ethnic narrative can improve the reconciliation process as individual, fragmented goals become contained within a single narrative.

### *The Srebrenica Massacre*

Srebrenica is a small mountain town located in the eastern part of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnia and Herzegovina forms one of the countries in former Yugoslavia that has seen many bloody confrontations; in recent history, the period from World War II to the fall of communism in the 1990s created conditions for widespread civil unrest and violence. During the 1980s, still under the Communist rule, Srebrenica was primarily populated by Bosnian Muslims, who made up approximately two thirds of the population, and Bosnian Serbs, who made up the other third. During the war following the fall of Tito's regime, the number of Bosnian Muslim refugees in the area soared to 40,000 people (Pollack 2003a), but the town itself fell into Serb-controlled territory, administered by the self-proclaimed Republika Srpska. In July 1995, the area was declared a safe zone by the United Nations, and Dutch troops were stationed at the nearby town of Potočari to protect the refugee population.

During the Bosnian War, on July 11, 1995, troops from the Bosnian Serb Republika Srpska took over Srebrenica, disregarding the UN-declared safe zone. They rounded up all the Bosnian Muslims from Srebrenica to Potočari, and subsequently 8000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were executed (Pollack 2003a). The bodies of the victims were buried in mass graves and were later

moved by the Serbian military to secondary graves in order to eliminate any traces of the crimes. The movement of the bodies resulted in a massive distortion of the remains, making it extremely hard to later exhume and identify individuals killed in the massacre (Wagner 2011).

The war ended in 1995 with the help of the International community and the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement. To oversee the aftermath and bring justice to the bereaved families, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) was established. In order to gather evidence of mass crimes and to serve justice to the perpetrators, the ICTY often uses evidence found in mass graves and from the exhumed bodies to prosecute military generals (Wagner 2011). The exhumed remains are subsequently returned to the families of the victims. In some cases, this can be a very lengthy process as many of the remains from Srebrenica are scattered across many secondary graves making it hard to identify the bodies (Clark 2010b).

The length of the entire process is also a factor in whether reconciliation can be achieved or not. Thus far, the investigations by the International court have taken over fifteen years to complete. Due to the length of the investigations, some of the war generals died in prison, and families of the deceased are continually dragged back to places of painful memories when new information is uncovered. For example, one of the wives of the deceased revealed that only 35% of her husband's remains have been found. The International authorities have promised to contact her if they find anything else,

further prolonging her fixation on the mass grave investigations (Arnautovic 2011).

The way international and local communities have dealt with the remains of those killed at Srebrenica demonstrates the complicated nature of reconciliation after mass violence. The reburial of victims often creates public memorials for individual bodies, not allowing the victims to rest nor allowing memories of the victims to enter the realm of collective forgetting. The International authorities, while helping with the process, prolong the painful memories. For over ten years, as investigations and the search for justice continues, ethnic tensions have scarcely diminished as wounds and investigations remain open.

#### *Role of the dead in the reconciliation politics of the living*

The bodies of the deceased and their associated meanings continue to have an effect on the relations within the community of the living. First, dead bodies occupy a specific physical space, claiming the territory for the group of people who are related to the deceased. This means that territory remains an integral part of people's identities as many people are tied to the physical space that surrounds them through their ancestors. Ancestral presence necessitates that territory becomes an inescapable part of social life (Antonsich 2009). Social groups become politically tied to the territory around them, either through the development of national or ethnic claims. Despite attempts to de-emphasize territory, it continues to play an important role in the politics of the living, especially in the reburial of past victims. As a result, the territory a memorial occupies is significant because

it re-organizes the territorial boundaries of an ethnic group (Verdery 1999). For example, in the case of the Srebrenica massacre the Bosnian Serbs, who currently occupy most of the town, feel threatened by the reburial site that commemorates the Bosnian Muslim dead partly because it allows the ethnic community of the bereaved families to lay claims on that territory as their own (Pollack 2003a).

As territory takes on new meaning in new socio-political contexts, the deceased bodies also acquire new meanings. The meanings of deceased bodies are re-negotiated because of their sustained connection with members of the living community. In his influential book on the role of mortuary practices in human societies, Robert Hertz (1907) reveals how death rituals are not for the dead but in fact, are created for the living. Katherine Verdery (1999), drawing on Hertz's ideas further conceptualizes the distinction between "living" and "dead" communities. Together, the communities of the dead and the living form the human community. As a result, the human community as a whole is affected by any changes that occur in the relationship between the living and the dead. The manipulation of the dead community, therefore, through things such as mass graves and myths that arise, can reorganize the relations among the living (Verdery 1999). "Reburials thus involve reconfiguring human communities according to new standards of inclusion and exclusion" (Verdery 1999:109). Reburials assign a dead community special status, binding it to the territory, allowing the community of the living to not only reassign physical borders but also reconfigure the structure of the living community itself. In other words,

the living community now has a physical basis on which to exclude other living communities. New collective memories can consequently be created to fit specific (often political) goals. The re-organization of human societies occurs through the renewal of collective memory and the reconfiguration of the physical space. It also affects the way collective forgetting and justice can be achieved. Depending on which characteristics the collective memory of the living takes on; the re-organization of living communities can either help reconciliation or inhibit its progress.

### *Collective Memory*

By manipulating the perceptions of the dead and re-creating collective memories, communities try to arrive at some sort of truth and justice. The collective memory is what guides the perceptions of the community. The living community creates and recreates memories based on not just the past, but also the present. Communities draw on certain aspects of the past to make sense of their current situation. While collective memory implies an intimate connection to ancestors and the past, according to Maurice Halbwachs (1992), the past is only a resource for the present. As a resource to navigate the present, therefore, memory also responds to contemporary concerns as much as it draws on past experience (Ray 2006). Collective memory is what recreates a specific ethnic narrative, a narrative that can be perpetuated and become intergenerational and in this regard can facilitate the collective forgetting and de-individualization of any one victim. De-individualization allows the victims to become part of a grander collective narrative. These narratives, though based on the past, are produced as a reaction to contemporary experiences.

Mass graves and monuments that are built to commemorate the victims are an example of how a past wrong can become manifested in contemporary ethnic narratives and can create intergenerational prejudice and mistrust. Mart Bax, writing about the World War II monuments in Bosnia, explains that Croats despised the monuments built by the Serbian Communists (Bax 1997). Particularly, a new Communist monument was built on a site that commemorated a mass execution of Serbs by the fascist Croats during the war. Furthermore, it was built on the orders of a Serbian majority Communist government in an area whose surrounding rural population was mostly Croatian. Although the monument was supposed to symbolize victory of communism over fascism, in a communist state that preferred to ignore any ethnic tension, the mostly Serbian Communists made the rural peasants, mostly Croats, build and maintain the monument (Bax 1997). The Croatian rural population resented the treatment they received from the Serbo-Communist army, which further perpetuated ethnic differences. While the Serb Communists viewed this endeavor as a way to commemorate the victory of communism, the Croats who built and were forced to maintain this monument viewed it as a humiliating memorial that remembered what fascist Croats, their ancestors, did wrong in the past (Bax 1997). While this hatred was based on the past—the mass graves created during World War II—it was the treatment and the forced labor to maintain the monument that the contemporary Croats experienced from the Serbs, which not only preserved the collective myths of prejudice against the Serbs but, in fact, confirmed them.

It is the contemporary experiential affirmation that perpetuates the collective myth. Memory is inherently linked to action, experience and meaning (Kuijt 2008). Memory is created “through actions of people who intersect at different levels” (Kuijt 2008:174). In other words, memory and meaning can be created between various members of the same community. From everyday interaction, memory can become intergenerational as more long-term events are brought together to create collective memory (Kuijt 2008). Collective narratives are consequently developed, encompassing the communal cleavages that people experience and are often retold and simplified along ethnic lines.

The creation of collective memory is therefore a result of the past, but also of the current experiences people collect. This is evident in Bosnia’s Communist past, which can now readily be used to create contemporary collective narratives as well. Under Joseph Tito, the Yugoslavian Communist rule aimed to eliminate ethnic tension altogether by simply emphasizing the communist ideology. In this way, the communist state attempted to resolve the ethnic problems by ignoring the tensions, but the communist moratorium only worked to fuel local hatreds (Denich 1994). They enforced a moratorium on ethnicity without understanding that memories of ethnic hatred were scattered throughout the countryside in the form of mass graves, allowing constant remembrance of past wrongs and no venue to resolve them (Bel-El 2002). In effect, the stories and locations of mass graves were passed on through generations (Bel-El 2002). Moreover, nationality became conflated with ethnicity, since in Slavic

languages the word *narod* is used to refer to both nationality and ethnicity. This meant that the narratives created became ethnically motivated, rather than nationalistic or ideological (Denich 1994). Mass graves were scattered around the landscape of former Yugoslavian countries, and many were left unopened, which only fueled the creation of ethnic narratives and collective memories. As a result, no real reconciliation was achieved under the Communist rule, which led to the bloody confrontations of the 1990s and the Bosnian war. The contemporary case of the Srebrenica massacre analyzed below is another example of why commemoration lacking an inter-ethnic narrative may exacerbate tension.

### *Collective Forgetting*

In cases of natural deaths, mortuary practices facilitate collective memory but also aid collective forgetting as the deceased becomes de-individualized. Mortuary practices facilitate collective forgetting, however in cases of special deaths, commemorative practices may spur memory-making instead of forgetting. Secondary burials are the mechanisms that allow collective forgetting. They serve as a way to disassociate the social person with the dead body. After some time, the social networks that gave the bodies their meaning cease to exist, allowing the community to move on (Hertz 1907). Secondary burials serve as a way to dismember and de-contextualize the dead. This allows communities to eventually de-individualize and re-constitute the dead as part of the collective (Kuijt 2008). Secondary burials exist all over the world precisely because mortuary practices and burials are not meant for the benefit of the dead community.

Secondary rites exist so that the living community can become accustomed to the loss and mend the broken social links left behind by the deceased. Cases where secondary burials are not possible are when mass graves are left unopened and the deceased are not properly commemorated. As such, it creates no closure for the survivors (Denich 1994). This lack of closure can leave room for manipulation of collective memory as past wrongs are paralleled with contemporary experiences of injustice and inequality. The more social networks were disrupted at once for ethnic reasons, means the more widespread will the association become. Not allowing the de-individualization of the deceased through mortuary rites, allows the community to launch narratives that mix the past ethnic wrongs with current hardships and injustices that they experience (such as socio-economic or political inequality), creating lasting ethnic prejudices rather than facilitating collective forgetting and social reconciliation.

In instances of mass murder, normal mortuary practices cannot be followed and secondary burial is not so easily used to facilitate collective forgetting, since these deaths are marked as different from natural deaths because of their violent nature. Although desire for a secondary burial and mending the newly created gaps in social networks exist, normal mortuary rites cannot be practiced to deal with an abnormal death. As Hertz (1907:85) posited, the bones of the deceased who died a violent death are buried apart from the people who died a normal death, as “their death has no end”. Victims of extraordinary circumstances may roam the earth forever as they are assigned special status (Hertz 1907). There is no doubt



that ethnic cleansing is an example of unusual death. The special status assigned to them because of their rare and violent death preserved the memories associated with these dead bodies, further impeding collective forgetting that facilitates reconciliation. Although secondary burials allow for the process of communal forgetting, the special status of the burial sustains the memory of the victims and their death through symbolic or physical creation of commemorative space. The memorials, the acknowledgement that a wrong has been done to an entire group, allow the community to move on (Denich 1994). As they help de-contextualize the individuals, however, the memorials simultaneously become memorials to injustices committed by the perpetrating group (Denich 1994). This is where the paradox of reburial after mass murder becomes obvious: while it is only the mass de-contextualization of individuals that can lead to intra-ethnic peace, the creation of memorial sites can aggravate inter-ethnic problems.

Memory can thus operate in two ways. It either allows to abstract and to de-contextualize the individual, or it marks them as special, making their death have no end. Larry Ray (2006) calls these two mechanisms the “memory work” and “melancholia”. Whereas memory work allows reconciliation, melancholia perpetuates painful memories. Furthermore, memory is closely tied with territory. In some instances, specific places can act as ‘flashbulb’ memories, creating powerful places for public memory (Ray 2006). These are the places that bring back all the memories associated with that specific place upon repeated encounters. Mass graves specifically have the capability of reminding communities of

painful memories and may indeed create ‘stagnating memory’ (Bax 1997), inhibiting reconciliation. The only way for a community to reconcile these memories is by “reclaiming the site of the mass murder” (Pollack 2003a:800). Although a space can be reclaimed to help a community move on, in cases such as Bosnia, where territories and mass graves are ethnically interspersed, it can just as easily threaten the territorial integrity of the other ethnic group. The possible solution is to create ways for communities, not ethnicities, to reclaim the mass murder sites.

The relationship between mass graves, territory, and memory is exactly why, for example, some of the mass graves remained unopened in the aftermath of Argentina’s Dirty Wars. Following the mysterious death of many people under the Argentine military government, a movement called Plaza de Mayo started. Plaza de Mayo comprised of the bereaved mothers of the dead from the Dirty Wars in Argentina. Consequently, a select group of mothers called Madres of the de Bonafini separated and demanded a ban on unsolicited exhumations of mass graves by the government. The Madres of the de Bonafini consisted of a group of mothers who endured never finding the remains of their sons in order to combat depoliticization and forgetting of their sons’ deaths. The Madres fought government attempts to identify bodies in the graves so that the memory of State violence against the population was constantly remembered (Robben 2005). The Madres wanted the whole community to remember the atrocities of the State by not opening the graves, and to force the government to take responsibility by forever remembering their wrongs.

The Madres of the de Bonafini had a conscious purpose behind not opening the mass graves, whereas the graves that were left unopened in former Yugoslavian countries only served to exacerbate ethnic prejudices. Moreover, when the mass graves in Yugoslavia were opened, the goal was to reconcile the bereaved communities with the individual deceased rather than ethnic communities. Despite hopes of reconciliation, the process of collective forgetting in Yugoslavia is slow, because of the concentration on commemorating the individual and not on creating public, all-inclusive memorials. The consequent reburials of the deceased, often at the site of the mass murder, create memory of the individuals as well as land claims for the victimized group.

Rather than creating memories for the individuals through detailed exhumation and reburial, the memorials commemorating mass death best facilitate collective forgetting when the individual is abstracted. There is evidence in Sarah Tarlow's (1997) article on death and bereavement after the First World War, that the mass violence experience necessitated mass burials and the eventual loss of the individual in the cemeteries. Tarlow argues that the memories of individuals gradually moved to the private sphere. This is especially apparent in monuments such as "The Tomb of an Unknown Soldier", where an unknown soldier's body became a symbol for all the soldiers who died during World War I (Tarlow 1997). Since the commemoration was moved to the private sphere, the public sphere only saw the idea of soldiers, not the soldiers themselves. Although local memorials were also created and were much more personal rather than national, they

remained manifestations of a local relationship to a national tragedy. There was a shift, therefore, from remembering the individual to remembering an instance of communal misery. The abstraction and the shift of mourning in the private sphere were much less entrenched in the case of Yugoslavia. What certainly helped in the case of the World War I memorials was the fact that the deceased were mostly soldiers, rather than civilians and children. Along with their commemoration, the Yugoslavian families wanted to bring a sense of truth to their unjustly killed relatives. The emphasis on the individual is a crucial difference between the memorials of World War I and the ones currently created in Yugoslavia. The families of the Srebrenica deceased were not forced to de-individualize their dead, since the Bosnian government did not build one single memorial to the deaths, as was the case with the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Relatives continued to seek their individual kin to commemorate them, justify their death, and move on. In this case, individual reburial did not help to begin the process of collective forgetting and communal healing

### *Justice*

While the soldiers who died during World War I are remembered as heroes, victims of the Srebrenica massacre are viewed as unfortunate casualties whose deaths should have been prevented. The abstraction is not as easily achieved here, as the Bosnian government cannot uphold one ethnicity over the other and designate them as martyrs (Pollack 2003a). There is also a certain desire for retribution, revenge, and justice, especially in cases where the deceased were killed under violent circumstances. The International judicial system concentrates on helping the

families of the deceased overcome their loss (Clark 2010b) and the International Courts were created to help the families search for justice and the ultimate “truth”, hoping that appeasing every family will eventually lead to peace.

The concentration of the International Courts on individual families can be viewed in terms of a recent shift in the court system towards the rights of the victims, because of the entry of kin into the judicial process. The result is that retributive claims are made in the name of the families (Linders 2002). The emphasis on achieving closure for the families thus rests on the evaluation of the worth of the dead as well as the fact that premature deaths are increasingly becoming intolerable (Linders 2002). This shift is because of the increasing commoditization of the individual, but also because of recent changes in international perception of what type of death is acceptable. Ethnic cleansing is consequently viewed as an illegitimate way to die. In the case of Yugoslavia, the bereaved families expect their dead to be evaluated as more innocent than the perpetrators of the crimes. This perception complicates the situation and the search for justice, however, because perpetrators are hard to identify in a community where ‘the other’ is always the perpetrator and saying otherwise may only worsen tensions. In efforts to deter any more ethnic conflict in the region, the International Courts are limited by the same realities as the Bosnian government. For the same reasons that the Bosnian government cannot proclaim one ethnic group as martyrs and victims of the war (since it would qualify more conflict between groups), the International Courts have to be very careful whom they call the perpetrators

as they attempt to serve justice. The question necessarily becomes “justice for whom?” as none of the individuals or ethnic groups will allow being held fully responsible for crimes that so many individuals from many different ethnicities committed.

Although Linders (2002) identifies a shift towards victims’ rights in the context of North American society, the principles she draws on are especially applicable to the current practice of international law. The International Courts are an integral part of the reconciliation process in the former Yugoslav Republics, which privilege closure for the families and the finding of perpetrators in order to charge them with the appropriate war crimes and appeasing the victims. Especially in the aftermath of the Srebrenica massacre the victims were given unprecedented attention as each mass grave is exhumed and attempts are made to identify the bodies in the mass graves. The search for justice continues the inquiry into the individuality, but more importantly, the ethnicity of the dead, which does not allow full abstraction of the violent deaths as it puts continuous emphasis on ethnicity.

Creation of collective memory, collective forgetting, and the search for justice are all key parts in the reconciliation process, but the constant emphasis on ethnicity weakens this process as memories and collective myths become ethnicity based rather than community based. The people currently involved in the process are involved at different scales of the process and often have different goals that are not all conducive to the development of inter-ethnic peace. First, the role of the victims’ families

perpetuates the need for reburial so the families can attain closure. Families will always demand to remember their dead relatives. Second, the role of the perpetrators is unclear as they are left out of the reconciliation. Since both sides had perpetrators, there have been no attempts to prosecute or help low-ranking soldiers move on, leaving them largely out of the peace building process. Finally, the International Criminal Court has, for the past twenty years, exhumed mass graves and identified many bodies in search of the ultimate justice, which helps families move on, but sustains the memories of violence. While all three sets of actors interact in the reconciliation process, combining them reveals the tension which is unresolved when ethnic physical or symbolic commemorations are created.

#### *Bereaved Families*

The damaged families are the starting point of any reconciliation process. Families need a way to attain closure by commemorating their dead. Since the Serbian army relocated bodies from the original mass graves it is currently a very arduous, long process to identify whole bodies of individuals. Indeed, many of the families of the people murdered in Srebrenica are still searching for their relatives. So far approximately 4,000 bodies have been recovered and reburied at the former Dutch safe zone site of Potočari (Pollack 2003a). Given a choice as to where their murdered relatives should be buried, the affected families chose the site of Potočari. Potočari was chosen because it crystallized the ultimate horror of the event and allowed the families to symbolically reclaim the territory where the violence occurred. It was necessary for the affected community of Bosnian Muslims to first convert the site of the

massacre for commemoration in order to begin the process of personal recovery (Pollack 2003a). Taking over a territory also re-creates the meaning of that territory and likewise, all the people associated with that territory. The ethnic Serbs living in the area, now at a majority in Srebrenica, tried to prevent the Bosnian Muslims reburying their relatives at Potočari, because they considered it an invasion of their territory (Pollack 2003a). All the Bosnian Muslim settlements were located very far from Potočari and meant an inconvenient journey for most travelers. Additionally, the lingering tensions between the ethnic groups often made the trip unsafe for many Bosnian Muslims (Pollack 2003a). After the memorial was built, therefore, the Serbian majority continued to be unhappy when Bosnian Muslims visited the sites of their deceased Muslim relatives since they see this as an offensive invasion of Serbian territory. Serbs residing in Srebrenica will often throw stones at the visitors, showing the younger generation reasons for hatred (Pollack 2003a).

Despite inconveniences and Bosnian Serb protests, the Bosnian Muslims were allowed to choose the town of Potočari to create a public memorial to injustice, rather than mourn in private. The Srebrenica memorial fails to encompass the entire public, despite being a public memorial in an inter-ethnic country. Instead, the memorial implicitly blames the Serbian population for the deaths. The exclusion of the Serbian population in the memorial process impedes future reconciliation as the potential for politicization still exists. All survivors must participate in ceremonies to celebrate their loved ones in order to ensure that they are not

polarized by radical political rhetoric (Pollack 2003b). This is important for the survivors of a select ethnic group, but also for all the survivors of multi-ethnic communities. If a specific ethnic community is excluded, they are easier to radicalize, and therefore there is more chance of recurring ethnic violence in the future. Mourning as an inter-ethnic community instead, would establish inter-ethnic collective memory that creates long-term peace.

There is basis for such inter-ethnic reconciliation. For example, most people in the Bosnian region acknowledge the right of a mother to mourn her son. Development of mourning based on a mother's right to bury her son is potentially possible (Pollack 2003a), but it would require de-emphasis of ethnic differences. The reason why ethnically different mothers cannot unify their grief is in many ways because of local memories of injustice that are remembered along ethnic lines (Bax 1997). Proceeding with the construction of memorials that emphasize ethnic differences will continue to spur feelings of mutual distrust.

Mutual distrust becomes manifested in the everyday lives of the community as the families of the deceased pass their fears onto the next generation. This distrust is most evident in the school system of Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are currently thirteen different ministries operating the education process in Bosnia and all of them have different curricula (Clark 2010a). Parents have a choice over which curriculum their children will follow and most choose the curriculum closest to their ethnicity. This choice means that, for example, the history

books children use are much more sympathetic to their ethnicity's role during the war. Furthermore, because of the lack of educational infrastructure, children of Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Muslims often go to the same school building, yet the children do not necessarily interact with children of other ethnic groups. They will attend different classes at different times, creating a system of "two schools under one roof" (Clark 2010a). Despite the fact that communal reconciliation can most easily be achieved through local tools such as education, the current divisions that exist within the education system only further amplify these ethnic differences (Clark 2010a). The children are taught separate histories, inhibiting the community's ability to move beyond their ethnic narratives.

#### *Veterans*

As children are taught about ethnic differences, adults have already internalized ethnic prejudice. While the families of the deceased are considered to be vital actors who need to gain closure, the perpetrators of the crimes are often overlooked in the reconciliation process as no one investigates how they view the current situation. The veterans are often prejudiced and fuel the prejudice of their community (Basic 2007). The only time the perpetrators become the focus of reconciliation is when the International Courts search for the ultimate perpetrator of the war crimes. As the courts attempt to punish only the highest officials, what happens to the low-ranking former soldiers becomes unclear. The common perpetrators, as opposed to high-officials, are still integral to reconciliation because they constitute a significant part of society. The atrocities of war they witnessed are

comparable in emotional weight to the families of the bereaved, yet they are left out of the reconciliation process altogether as courts concentrate on high officials and appeasing the families, providing virtually no programs for the veterans to move past their own prejudices and war memories. The veterans are the ones who are implicitly identified as the villains and the criminals (Basic 2007), yet there were soldiers on all sides. As a result each community looks at the veterans of the other ethnicity as the perpetrators, while protecting their own veterans. This perspective makes it almost impossible to serve justice to either side. At the same time there are no programs that would aid veterans to move past war atrocities and ethnic prejudices, leaving them out of the reconciliation process as they receive little direction instructing them how to build peace with their former enemies.

The inner rationale and current coping processes of the soldiers need to be investigated to create a transition process for the soldiers. In a study conducted by Natalja Basic, she found that none of the soldiers were forced to participate in the fighting and likewise, no draft was enforced at the time of war. What developed among the soldiers instead was the idea of the need for “collective defense” (Basic 2007). This idea presents a problem because each ethnic community’s perpetrators felt that what they did was necessary, making the search for justice by the international courts much harder. Nevertheless, in order to deliver a sense of justice to the bereaved families, the perpetrators must be investigated and punished. Punishing every soldier that served during the war is impossible. Instead, the courts concentrate on punishing the highest

officials, hoping to bring justice to the bereaved. The low-ranking former soldiers are largely left out of the reconciliation process as few authorities have inquired about their understanding of the current attempts to build long-lasting peace. As veterans, they are also often quite separated from the society at large. Moreover, when their former commanders are put on trial, it only fuels their feeling of injustice and re-awakens the idea for the need of collective defense and defending their leaders (Basic 2007). In each ethnic group, everyone is a victim, and no one is a perpetrator—unless it is the other ethnic group (in which case it reverses). The former soldiers that are excluded in the process of collective mourning and memory building will maintain the memories and experiences they accrued during the war. Re-socialization of the soldiers would be much more beneficial in aiding the process of inter-ethnic healing and reconciliation if veterans of both ethnicities are to move past their prejudices.

#### *International Courts*

Reconciliation can only be achieved when each community forgives the other. The local relationships have to be restored and repaired (Clark 2010a). The bureaucratic system, however, is extremely inefficient at achieving local reconciliation and instead concentrates on universal principles and punishing the high, most responsible officials. The international courts have been incredibly careful about prosecuting only the highest commanders. Despite this effort, any condemnation of low-ranking soldiers, commanders, or events exacerbates ethnic tensions in the region. For example, in 2012 The Hague released two Croatian military generals, who were charged with human rights

violations, because of inconclusive evidence and a claim that they were only following orders. The reaction to this development in former Yugoslav countries demonstrates the never-ending circle of blame that occurs when any general is charged or released with war crimes or violations of human rights. In this case, while the Croatians were rejoicing that their military generals were not found guilty of war crimes, the Serbian government condemned the decision by saying that it is a move backwards that will “open old wounds” (BBCNews 2012). None of the ethnic groups are willing to be held fully responsible (nor should they be), because each group feels they were equally mistreated during the war by other groups. This perception demonstrates that no matter the amount of effort the International Courts put into finding justice, one of the groups will remain dissatisfied.

The investigations and exhumations conducted by the ICTY do help bereaved families reunite with their dead relatives and help put them to rest, which diminishes inter-ethnic mistrust as trust is found (Clark 2010b). Exhumations also provide invaluable evidence for the crimes committed. The recovery of bodies from a mass grave is a crucial part of the reconciliation process as recovering the bodies helps the bereaved individuals grant reconciliation (Juhl & Einar Olsen 2006). Essentially, recovery of bodies from mass graves is one of the few ways in which institutions can accelerate the process of collective forgiving (Juhl & Einar Olsen 2006). Recovering individual bodies, however, simultaneously slows the process of collective forgetting since the goal becomes to commemorate the individual

victim (and their ethnicity) rather than abstract their memory.

Additionally, the national and international institutions responsible for excavating the dead also leave ethnic hatred unresolved, as no inter-ethnic dialogue takes place and instead memorials to injustice are built. In many cases, “internationally sponsored efforts to identify bodies have polarized both Bosniak Serbs and Bosniak [Muslim] reactions” (Wagner 2011:31). While the court has the power to establish the official truth, it is a much harder process for the community to internalize and believe it. For example, in 2009, one day after 534 Bosnian Muslim bodies were added to the Srebrenica memorial, the Serbian majority in the town paraded through the streets wearing T-shirts with a printed picture of the Serbian war general, Ratko Mladic (Clark 2010b). The subsequent commemorative re-burial of the bodies thus created ethnic memorials that are humiliating to the perpetrators of those crimes. Since the Bosnian Muslims used Bosnian Serbian territory for their memorial, the Bosnian Muslims reminded the Serbian Srebrenica population of the atrocities that the Serbs and their ancestors had played during the war time. The Serbian population in turn felt that they were being blamed for war crimes that were committed in self-defense. Considering that ethnic narratives and collective memories of the events differ and virtually all of the groups claim innocence or subscribe to the idea of “collective defense”, memorials, such as the one built at Potočari, only cause further tension. Jenine Clark (2010b) suggests that the only solution to this problem is to instead subscribe to the ‘human’ nature of the deceased, rather than to their ethnicities.

Furthermore, the ICTY's intention behind the involvement in the reconciliation process is informed by more international, progressive goals. The right to know what happened to dead relatives is nested within a discourse of international human rights (Wagner 2011). The courts are thus trying to deal with a very local problem by applying universal principles to the situation. As a consequence, society is expected to move on to a brighter future because the purpose of the universal principles is to be used to aid the reconciliation process. However, truth and justice are re-negotiated locally and within the society and are not just an abstract idea (Wagner 2011). Problems with reconciliation should be found at the grassroots (though not individual) level, not within the international discourse for human or victims' rights (Clark 2010b).

While the international courts aid by exhuming bodies and help the bereaved families move on, they also emphasize progress and want societies to move beyond the mourning period in such a way that restricts the creation of inter-ethnic collective memory. This goal in fact reflects the ambiguity of the Dayton Accords in general, as they "call for unification while tacitly endorsing partition" (Pollack 2003a:799). Although the international institutions attempt to draw on universal principles to aid reconciliation, in reality they only maintain ethnic divisions through reburial and commemorations of specific events. This problem should have been dealt with on a more local level, emphasizing the local community as a whole, rather than adhering to ethnic differences.

### *Conclusion*

Specifically in the case of Yugoslavia, ethnic tensions have permeated the community for decades. Since the end of World War II, ethnic tension has been the center of many communities in the region, especially in the multi-ethnic state of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The most recent wars that ended the Yugoslavian state only emphasized the problems of reconciling communities after mass violence. Indeed, the fluidity between the victims and the perpetrators, as well as the length of the international judicial processes, led to problems with reconciliation between different ethnic communities.

In Argentina some of the victims of the Dirty Wars were left in their mass graves as symbols and reminders of State violence. In contrast, the creation of commemorative memorials through the individual reburial of the victims of the Srebrenica massacre aggravated conflict, since the Potočari memorial site helped reconcile only the families and communities of the victims. Srebrenica's Bosnian Serb group was left with a memorial of injustice that implicated their ethnic group as the perpetrators of violence. Simultaneously, the same memorial reclaimed territory that is associated with the violence of the war to help the community deal with the atrocity. Due to continually shifting demographics the reclaimed territory also maintains ethnic differences as territory is claimed in the name of one ethnic group, often at the expense of offending the other. Similar problems accompany the attempts by international courts to find 'true' justice, as each ethnic group refuses to be more accountable than the other. Moreover, attempts by the International Court to



exhume individual bodies and return them to the bereaved families emphasizes the importance of the individual, making the full de-contextualization that is needed for collective forgetting difficult to achieve.

The reconciliation process needs to involve all the affected members of the community and, to do so, inter-community narratives need to be emphasized. The process is currently still permeated by ethnic differences and selective collective memories. Schools are subsequently made to safeguard ethnic differences as children are kept apart from other ethnicities, potentially creating intergenerational memories of division. The solution, therefore, is not as simple as either leaving the dead in the mass graves, since that approach did not work during the Communist rule, or reburying the dead in symbolic places that claim territory and justice for that specific ethnic group. Reconciliation inside ethnic communities needs to take into account that there are two sets of collective memories, and it is the inter-communal collective memory that needs to be reconstructed in a way that does not offend either side. Real, inter-ethnic memory needs to be created. In other words, collective solution is needed to resolve a collective problem. This solution may not be the best way to commemorate individual victims, but it is the best way to facilitate collective forgetting and reconciliation. In this case, the international community is well-poised to do this, as neither the Bosnian government nor municipalities can enforce de-individualization of victims locally without attracting criticism that they are on the side of the other ethnic group. Such a collective problem should not be resolved with the exhumation and reburial of individuals,

since the exhumation and reburial have already taken on ethnic overtones, and is likely to maintain ethnic differences. Memorials such as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, as painful as it was for the families of the deceased, are better poised in facilitating collective forgetting and communal healing than individual-based reburial.

Creating a similar collective solution such as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is by no means easy to achieve. In the case of the Srebrenica massacre, it may be too late to implement such a solution, because it would require the authorities to stop excavating remains and build a collective memorial to all the victims: uniting them as victims of war atrocities, rather than victims under a specific ethnic group. The commemoration process in Srebrenica may be too far along, as failing to rebury the rest of the bodies in the mass graves would not be fair to the families who are still waiting for their relatives to be found and re-interred. Yet a collective solution does not always aim to be fair to individuals, rather it upholds the well-being and future of the community as a whole. If a new generation is to be raised without re-learning the ethnic distrust that is abundant in the region, it is imperative to change the current reconciliation process and de-individualize it. Only de-individualization of the deceased will allow the communities to abstract the dead, which will be the first step in de-emphasizing the importance of ethnicity of the deceased. It is difficult to reach ultimate justice by abstracting the dead, but in order to build long-lasting peace it is more important to forgive and forget rather than constantly re-dig the past.

*References Cited:*

- Antonsich, Marco. 2009. On territory, the nation-state and the crisis of the hyphen. *Progress in Human Geography* 33(6):789-806.
- Arnautovic, Marija. 2011. New Burials, New Mourning 16 Years After Srebrenica. *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*, July 11. <http://www.rferl.org/media/video/24262499.html>.
- Basic, Natalja. 2007. You can't runaway: former combat soldiers and the role of social perception in coping with war experience in the Balkans. In *After mass crime: rebuilding states and communities*. B. Pouligny, S. Chesterman and A. Schnabel, eds. Pp. 142-164. New York: United Nations University Press.
- Bax, Mart. 1997. Mass Graves, Stagnating Identification, and Violence: A Case Study in the Local Sources of "The War" in Bosnia Hercegovina. *Anthropological Quarterly* 70(1):11-19.
- BBCNews. 2012. Hague war court acquits Croat Generals Gotovina and Markac. *BBC News*, November 16, Europe sec. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-20352187>.
- Bel-El, Ilana R. 2002. Unimagined communities: the power of memory and the conflict in former Yugoslavia. In *Memory and power in post-war Europe studies in the presence of the past*. J.-W. Müller, ed. Pp. 206-222. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Clark, Janine Natalya. 2010a. Education in Bosnia-Hercegovina: The Case for Root-and-Branch Reform. *Journal of Human Rights* 9(3):344-362.
- 2010b. Missing persons, reconciliation and the view from below: a case study of Bosnia-Hercegovina. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 10(4):425-442.
- Denich, Bette. 1994. Dismembering Yugoslavia: Nationalist Ideologies and the Symbolic Revival of Genocide. *American Ethnologist* 21(2):367-390.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. 1992. *On Collective Memory*. L.A.Coser, ed. Pp. 120-166. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hertz, Robert. 2004 (1907). *Death and the Right Hand*. New York: Routledge.
- Juhl, Kirsten and Odd Einar Olsen. 2006. Societal safety, archaeology and the investigation of contemporary mass graves. *Journal of Genocide Research* 8(4):411-435.
- Kuijt, Ian. 2008. The Regeneration of Life: Neolithic Structures of Symbolic Remembering and Forgetting. *Current Anthropology* 49(2):171-197.
- Linders, Annulla. 2002. The Execution Spectacle and State Legitimacy: The Changing Nature of the American Execution Audience, 1933-1937. *Law & Society Review* 36(3):607-655.

- Pollack, C. E. 2003a (1982). Burial at Srebrenica: linking place and trauma. *Social science & medicine* 56(4):793-801.
- 2003b. Intentions of burial: mourning, politics, and memorials following the massacre at Srebrenica. *Death Studies* 27(2):125-142.
- Ray, Larry. 2006. Mourning, Melancholia and Violence. *In Memory, trauma and world politics: Reflections on the relationship between past and present*. David Bell, ed. Pp. 135-156. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Robben, Antonius C.G.M. 2005. State Terror in the Netherworld: Disappearance and Reburial in Argentina. *In Death, Mourning, and Burial: a Cross-Cultural Reader*, A. C. G. M. Robben, ed. Pp. 134-148. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Tarlow, Sarah. 1997. An Archeology of Remembering: Death, Bereavement and the First World War. *Cambridge Archeological Journal* 7(1):481-511.
- Verdery, Katherine. 1999. *The political lives of dead bodies: reburial and postsocialist change*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wagner, Sarah. 2011. Identifying Srebrenica's Missing: the "Shaky" Balance of Universalism and Particularism. *In Transitional justice: global mechanisms and local realities after genocide and mass violence*. A. L. Hinton, ed.
- Pp. 25-48. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.